

Daniel Cohen
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Israel Summer Report

This summer, I traveled to Israel for two months to study two Semitic languages I love as well as conduct a “fact-finding mission” about my late paternal grandparents who were born and raised in Baghdad as Iraqi Jews before immigrating to Israel in the 1950s. I first arrived in Israel in June on a Birthright trip. After Birthright, I took an intensive Arabic course at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Finally, I took a Hebrew Ulpan in Tel Aviv, during which time I conducted the bulk of my research.

Jerusalem: June 17th - July 19th

Following a 10-day Birthright trip that took me all around the country, I began my summer studying Arabic at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The Arabic course was incredibly demanding and equally rewarding. We had class five days a week, beginning at 8:30am and sometimes going as late as 4:00pm, and a sixth day each week for unique field trips around Jerusalem.

The students in my class came from many different backgrounds. Some were college students, just like me, yet many taking the course had different reasons for being there. One student was a lawyer hoping to work with refugee populations in the United States, while another said his company conducts business with partners in the Middle East. There was even a full-time dermatologist from Belgium, who said learning Arabic was his hobby. All were extremely dedicated.

I also took advantage of my time in Jerusalem to smell the spices at Machane Yehuda, eat on Ben Yehuda street, and visit the Old City on multiple occasions. There were a number of Rice students in Jerusalem whom I got to see, and I ran into Kenny Weiss, the Rabbi of Houston Hillel, on multiple occasions. I also began gathering my thoughts and preparing for my family research project.

While in Jerusalem, I reached out to Mizrahi poet and scholar Almog Behar, currently a postdoctoral fellow at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute. Before we met he sent me some of his work, addressing some of the very topics and questions I hoped to understand. In one piece titled “What is Mizrahiness? Seeking Answers Through Questions,” he asks questions that I hoped to answer in coming to Israel.

He writes, “What can Mizrahiness mean when so many Mizrahi people are actually of mixed identity – if not the product of a mixed-marriage then a product of the Israeli education system – identifying themselves with Zionist and Eurocentric points of view that make them ambivalent about themselves and their culture?” Secondly, and central to my inquiry, “Is it at all possible to renew Mizrahi culture, history and community after they have already been broken and dissolved?” In our conversation, I hoped to find answers.

Behar first told me a story of how he decided to pursue this field. When he was a young man his maternal grandmother, an immigrant from Baghdad, experienced a rapid onset of dementia. As her dementia progressed she very quickly lost the ability to speak Hebrew—which she only learned as an adult in Israel—and reverted back to her native Arabic. For Behar, this experience of being unable to communicate with his grandmother pushed him to study Arabic and look deeper into his family’s history and the story of an entire community.

I asked Behar his own question about the possibility of revitalization—will this community that has assimilated so much into Israeli society remain a distinct cultural entity? It often feels like the way back is gone, Behar says, and like the historical rupture is too great. But, he points out, still today there remains a strong Mizrahi, and Iraqi, identity found in literature, art, and music. Leaving Behar’s office, I wondered if his optimism was appropriate, for this historical divide was exactly what I hoped to re-cross in my research.

Tel Aviv: July 20th - August 16th

Although my Hebrew Ulpan at Tel Aviv University only began July 25th, I traveled to Tel Aviv on July 20th to begin the research component of my trip. In the week before my class started I visited the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center in Or Yehuda and conducted the first of my three interviews with family.

At the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center (BJHC), there were exhibits about the history of the area spanning back 2600 years, from the first Jews in Babylon up until the modern history of the Jewish community in Iraq. The museum had exhibits about the Babylonian Talmud, Jewish lifecycle events, and historical artifacts. The Center even featured various recreation exhibits, such as a Jewish neighborhood in Baghdad and an Iraqi synagogue—with a centrally located *bimah*, characteristic of the Sephardic tradition.

Two specific historical moments, however, most interested me with regard to my grandparents’ past experiences: the Farhud in 1941 and the mass migration of Iraqi Jews in the years following the establishment of the State of Israel. The BJHC showed a short film interviewing victims of the Farhud, a violent pogrom against the Jewish population in Baghdad. It is estimated that over

a hundred Jews were killed and hundreds of Jewish homes and businesses were looted or destroyed.

In addition, the museum featured an exhibit on the migration of over 120,000 Iraqi Jews from 1948-1952. From the single suitcase that Jewish migrants were permitted to take with them on the Ezra and Nehemia flights which transported thousands of Iraqi Jews to Israel, to the dismal living conditions in Israel's makeshift tent camps for new immigrants, the forced displacement of the community came with many hardships. I would soon learn just how devastating those events were to my grandparents and their families.

The same day I went to the BJHC, I went to Ramat Gan to speak with my great aunt Daisy, the younger sister of my grandmother. After forcing delicious kubeh, rice, and more on me, she proceeded to tell me about her memories of Baghdad.

Daisy said that as the Farhud began, one Arab acquaintance came to the house and asked for a dress that Daisy's mother had been sewing for her—the acquaintance knew what was coming, and wanted her dress before someone robbed the house.

Daisy told me that, soon, people came to the house and began throwing rocks, breaking the windows. The whole family went to their Arab neighbors, and Daisy's mother asked if they could stay with them since the children were scared. Their neighbors welcomed them in, and Daisy, my grandmother, and the rest of the family stayed with them until the evening. Daisy said when they returned home, everything was gone. Curtains, clothes, valuables—all stolen.

After a week exploring Tel Aviv and beginning my research process, I began my Hebrew Ulpan . Though the program was just a month, I was able to refresh old grammar I learned in middle school and build on that foundation. Both teachers were wonderful, and my driven classmates made the experience challenging and productive. Even though my comprehension is fairly strong, my comfort with speaking has long been a struggle. The class was taught only in Hebrew, which drastically improved my confidence with speaking. After listening to the second and third interviews I conducted with family as the class progressed, I could hear the improvement in my Hebrew.

For my second interview I spoke with my grandmother's brother, Moshe. Moshe was actually one of the first of my grandmother's family to go to Israel. Moshe said that after the Farhud, there was relative prosperity; however, as the Zionist movement in Israel grew stronger in the late 1940s, so did anti-semitism in Iraq. Moshe and another brother, David, joined the Zionist movement in Iraq, but in 1949 they found themselves in danger when they heard they were wanted by the police.

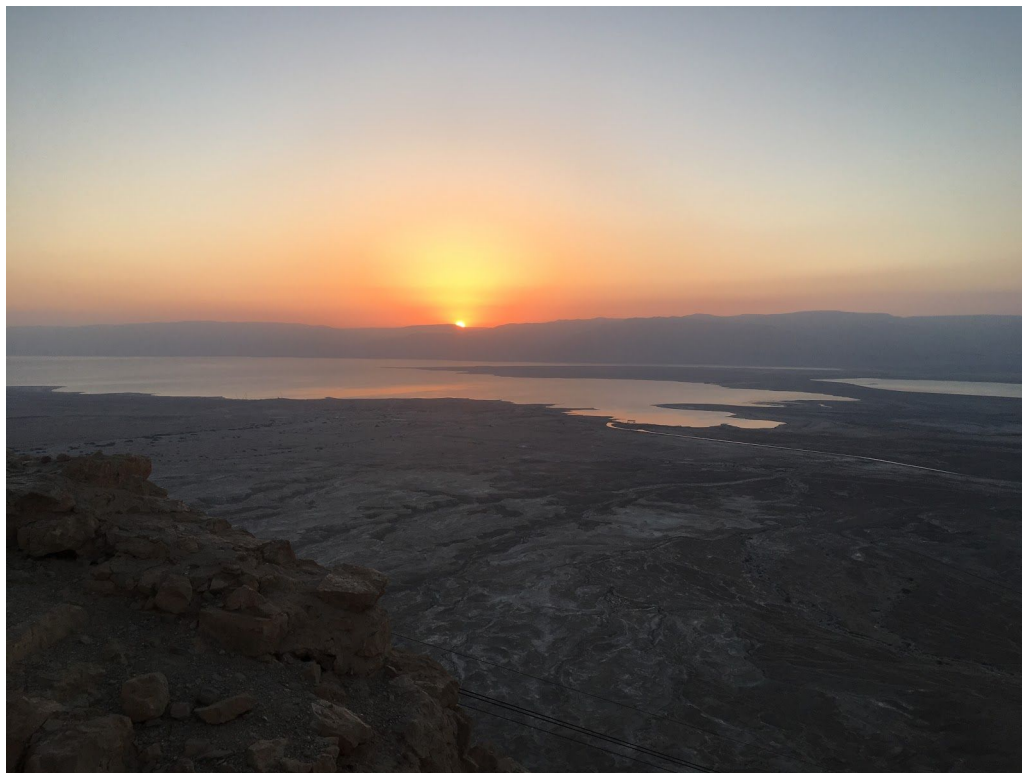
They knew they had to leave, but it was illegal for Jews to leave the country. Moshe told me he and David dressed in Kurdish clothes and snuck their way to the Iranian border. They were allowed in as refugees, and after a month in Tehran, they flew to Israel, where they ended up in a kibbutz. Soon after that my grandmother and two brothers came to Israel illegally as well.

In my third and final interview I spoke with Dalia and Naim, who live in Petah Tikva. Naim is another of my grandmother's brothers, and Dalia happens to be the daughter of my grandfather's sister. While speaking to them, I learned about both my grandparents. Dalia told me that her mother, my grandfather, and their whole family came to Israel in 1951 during the Ezra and Nehemia operations. Before this, I had never actually learned how my grandfather arrived in Israel.

Naim told me the story of how he, my grandmother, and another brother, David, attempted to leave Iraq illegally but were caught at the Iranian border by the police. He said they spent five days in prison, and were given a fine. Soon after that, however, they tried to cross illegally again, and this time succeeded. From Tehran, they then flew to Israel. A year later, the rest of the family came over through the Ezra and Nehemia flights.

I wrote these stories as they were told to me, and it was only upon reviewing them that I noticed a discrepancy. Moshe said that he and his brother, David, illegally left Iraq in 1949; yet Naim told me that he came to Israel in 1950 with my grandmother and their brother, David. And no, there are not two different brothers named David.

Such is the hazard that comes with hearing family stories from great aunts and uncles born in the 1930s—inconsistencies abound. My pestering questions come not a minute too soon, as the generation of Jews born in Iraq ages, and they remember less and less. The history is already slipping away, and what survives will be determined by the work of scholars like Almog Behar and institutions like the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center. And, perhaps, by recordings like these ones.



Sunrise at Masada



Lazy cat at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



Me with my eyes closed at the Babylonian Jewry Heritage Center



The abandoned village of Lifta in Jerusalem



Daniel, Colton, and me at the Kotel



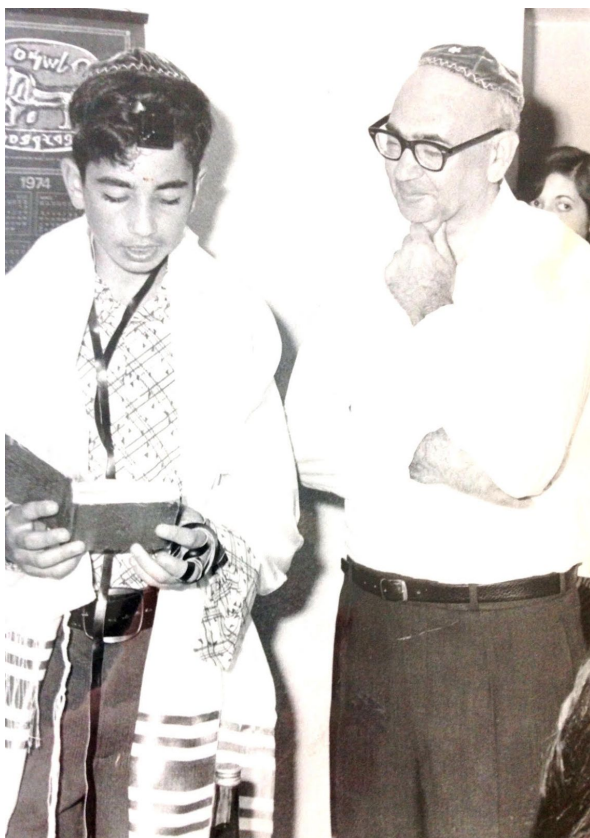
Some of the students from my Arabic class at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem



My great grandparents in Baghdad—my grandmother is the oldest daughter in the top left



My father, his sisters, and my grandparents



My dad and grandfather at my father's Bar Mitzvah